



# Dante's Ballad

"A magnificent testimony of the Latin American presence in the United States."  
—Mario Vargas Llosa on *Los sueños de América*

Eduardo González Viaña

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*Recovering the past, creating the future*

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To the Peregrinos de La Santa Muerte  
I sang with them in a bar in El Paso  
I sang off-key and I'm paying for my mistake



**We didn't cross the line.  
The line crossed us.**

**—Sung by the Peregrinos de La Santa Muerte**

# 1

## The First to Arrive at the Party Was a Donkey

Dante Celestino was waiting for the guests at the door when he saw two long ears appear, outlined in profile against the southern sky. The silhouette gradually appeared more clearly. It was a donkey, coming from afar and limping on one of its hind legs, but advancing toward him as if it were an old friend, as if it had been invited to the party, or as if someone had told it that Dante was an animal doctor.

By its slightly sorrowful, intellectual manner, when it was still a distance away, a black silhouette inside a yellow sun, Dante took it for an angel. But angels fly and don't trot, nor do they limp or raise their ears like someone bearing an unbearable pain without complaining. Nor do they look at us with enormous, red, nostalgia-filled eyes. Nor do they flick away bees with their tails. Nor do they approach us and move their ears in greeting. And since the donkey did all of that, the man did not hesitate to welcome him, gesturing to him to sit down next to the front door, to see if he could diagnose the cause of his lameness and help him.

Although he was all dressed up, Dante took up the task he had been doing for most of his life in the United States. He took off his necktie and bright blue velvet suitcoat, rolled up his sleeves, knelt down next to the injured animal, and began to evaluate the extent of the break. It was not too large, but it was deep and needed treatment. In the forty minutes that still remained before the first guests would arrive, Dante managed to find a piece of wood and a long scrap of denim with which he wrapped the hooved animal's injured leg. Finally, he placed the lame stranger next to the door of the hall. The

donkey, despite what was presumably great pain, had not complained during the splinting process, had not moved its ears or tail, but had been unable to prevent two heavy tears from spilling from its enormous eyes.

An hour later, Dante Celestino began to welcome his friends, inviting them into the community hall after an exchange of slaps on the back. Standing there all decked out in new clothes he had just purchased in Portland, smiling and accepting everyone's congratulations, the host of the party began to feel like the administrator of a circus as he greeted the ladies and gentlemen in attendance at the grand event. That thought soon passed and he remembered that the most important moment of his twenty-five years in the country had arrived and that he was keeping the promise he had made to his wife on her deathbed.

After straightening his shirt collar, Dante went to look with some astonishment at the expanse of the community hall. It was vast and elegant. The more than ninety families who lived in the complex had the right to use it, although at times they might consider it overly ostentatious when compared to their simple apartments. The apartments had only two bedrooms, but what had excited Mrs. Celestino when they moved into one of them was the size and elegance of the social center.

"We'll have Emmita's *quinceañera* here," she had proclaimed then, looking at her daughter who was just learning to walk.

But Mrs. Celestino had died a year earlier, without being able to participate in the solemn occasion that awaited Emmita, and in the hospital, near death, she had barely a moment to talk to her husband. She whispered in his ear the great commitment she was leaving him.

"You won't forget about the *quinceañera*," she said.

"I won't forget what?"

"Don't forget. You have to have her *quinceañera* next year, but a real *quinceañera*."

For the rest of his life, he would recall those words pronounced in an already distant, halting voice, the way the dying communicate their last wishes. Whether working with machinery or healing ani-

mals, when the moon grew large and yellow, or when the wind blew from the west, those words always came back to him. All the time, and now, moon after moon, Dante felt happy to be keeping his word. And in what a place!

"No . . . , *caramba*, these gringos are so practical," Dante said to himself whenever he thought about all the different uses one could make of the community hall. In all his years there, he would see it used as a basketball court, stage for the Christmas pageant, dance hall, and town meeting hall. Now, with the help of some generous friends and relatives and with several years of his savings, he was keeping his promise and turning the hall into a lavish party stage like those on which the lives and loves of soap-opera characters unfold.

Suddenly, on the same side of the horizon from which the lame donkey had emerged, an irresistible resplendence blazed, which turned out to be the front of a silver vehicle; the guests spilled out the door at the news that the queen of the birthday party was about to arrive. As it approached and while it progressed along the curves in the road, the silver shape came into view and finally revealed itself to be an extremely long limousine with fourteen doors and a blinding brilliance that forced observers to squint while looking at it. When it stopped, a chauffeur dressed in black leaped out to open the door that displayed a royal crown, and from there Emmita descended.

Her fingernails, red. Her lips, intense. One blue line below and another above her eyes. The mascara lengthened her eyelashes, turning them into floating wires. For the first time, the little girl was dressed as a woman or a queen. She was trying to step out of the vehicle, but she was wearing high heels and that made her descent difficult. Finally, she pushed against the seat of the car with her hands, managed to perform a graceful leap, and then walked down the red carpet that awaited her.

From that moment on, everything was shrillness. First, the applause was endless, and after the sharp, metallic blare of a trumpet that split the Mount Angel sky in two in order to proclaim to the winds and to everyone in the world that "*Éstas son las mañanitas que cantaba el rey David hoy por ser día de tu santo, te las canta-*



*mos a ti.*” After half an hour, everything returned to its place or found the place where it belonged. King David went to Heaven, Emma was led to her throne, and the limousine parked proudly next to the doorway to the party, while, right in front of it under the red awning, sitting on his four feet, the lame donkey completed the scene.

Dressed in an electric-blue dress with blinding silver and glass sequins, the mistress of ceremonies’ syrupy voice was announcing the endless parade of sponsors. The first to be introduced was Mr. Egberto Longaray from Guanajuato, about seventy years old, his cowboy hat tilted down to his nose. He was introduced as the sponsor of the limousine, because he was the one who had rented it.

Then came Don Manuel Montoya and his wife Socorro de Montoya, and when it was announced that they were the sponsors of the fireworks, an endless applause began, because Don Manuel had been able to achieve something that was nearly impossible in the United States. Throughout the country, the shining castles of fire were seen only on July 4th, but the irresistible congeniality of that Peruvian living in Oregon had won out, and he had managed to get the city of Mount Angel to allow him to bring them from who knows where and set them off on the day of the *quinceañera*. A palace of fireworks had been constructed next to the social center, and at midnight it would turn into sparks and stars, flowers of fire and firework doves, torches, radiancy, and thousands of lights capable of illuminating the entire density of the sky and of life.

The proprietress of the microphone then introduced the sponsors of the preparation of the hall: Mrs. Lulu, her husband Gabriel Escobar, and their daughters Lulu the second and Lulu the third. The four of them walked along looking worriedly at the floor, as though fearing they might have missed something and were ready to correct it immediately.

Next slid the alligator-skin boots of Carlos Montealegre, the sponsor of the music, accompanied by “his honorable wife Doña Guadalupe Alegre de Montealegre and their children Rubén, Martín,

Martina, Cleofe, Carlota, Carmencita, and Guadalupita, who add majesty to the party,” as the hostess explained.

Each of those mentioned was greeted with a round of applause that became shouts of approval with the introduction of Doña Marisol Rodríguez, the wavy-haired sponsor of the *ballet folklórico*, who was dressed as a country girl and was followed by close to twenty young men wearing red pants and white shirts and as many girls wearing bright blouses and very long skirts. Their eyes revealed ostensibly that they had been dancing constantly for weeks preparing for the grand occasion.

Then came the sponsors of the cards, photos, veils, cakes, drinks, hairdos, prayers, video, makeup, phone calls, personal invitations, and many other things whose sponsorship showed the many ways in which they had collaborated in the event. Everything had been rehearsed for several weekends, but from time to time a nervous *madrina* or rushed *padrino* violated the protocol.

The mistress of ceremonies then said that the orchestra was going to begin the party with the Sponsors' Waltz, and the strains of the “Blue Danube” were heard, but there were so many *padrinos* and *madrinas*, and they represented such different generations, that a single musical selection was not sufficient for all tastes, so the Danube soon yielded to “La niña fresa,” so the youngest could dance to it, and a *ranchera* for the enjoyment of the most elderly. When the time came that the music was only for the older people, all the men danced like Mr. Longaray from Guanajuato did, eyes and hats tilted downward toward the floor.

Seated in the center of the hall, the guest of honor smiled nervously. It was no secret that the town hairdresser had provided the throne in appreciation for all the hairstyling he had had to do for the Hispanic girls in Mount Angel. Bouquets of flowers and glittery trim gave that chair regal remembrances. A very dark woman with a hairdo that made her look like a fairy swore that Emma's dress, white with gold trim, had been ordered from Heaven by her mother, who likely remembered having seen that dress in the closet of one of her TV heroines.

Fourteen young ladies dressed in blue smiled nervously alongside the guest of honor while, facing them, fourteen young gentlemen wearing black tuxedos cast nervous glances at them, but none of them moved. Their suits looked too big in some cases, too small in others, but none of them looked uncomfortable but instead impatient to once and for all step toward their partners, as they had been rehearsing for several weeks. In the center of the hall, the *chambelán* was posing for a photograph. He was a young man holding a golden cane in his right hand, with which he was to give the order to dance as soon as the airs of the “Blue Danube” were heard.

All was silence and stillness. It was one of those moments when time stands still, when the world seems to pause and pose.

Never during his past life in Michoacán had Dante dreamed that he would ever throw a party like this one. Everything that he had spent, despite his friends’ support, was the product of many years at minimum wage, the most anyone would pay a man without a green card. Twenty-five years earlier, he had crossed the line; ten years later the one who would be his life companion arrived, and Emma had been born to them here in the United States. They had planned to have more children, but after the delivery, Mrs. Celestino’s doctor had said that she should not risk another pregnancy.

“Get all the *padrinos* and *madrinas* together for a picture,” someone whispered to him, and Dante wondered if he could do that while holding the accordion. It was his inseparable companion and many were hoping he would play.

Meanwhile, two short, twin priests from Michoacán, the Fathers Pichón, were walking back and forth from one end of the hall to the other, blessing everything they came across: the throne and pots of food, chairs and trumpets, ladies’ lilac silk-covered shoes and champagne bottles, tables and goblets, steel-toed boots and the *madrinas*’ makeup, purses embroidered with pearls and the *padrinos*’ slicked-back hair, guitars, memories of the distant homeland, speakers, and the almost heavenly clothing of the guest of honor.

Then, they decided that it was time to bless the ring that would be given to the queen of the party, and they approached the young

man who was the *chambelán*. He had spent the entire first hour of the party on his knees on a prie-dieu, his gaze fixed on Emmita, whom he was attempting to woo, apparently with little success.

"Do you have her gift here?"

The young man took a small package out of one of his pockets and unwrapped it slowly before the sponsors' expectant gaze.

"Oh, how lovely! Oh, how lovely!" a big-bosomed woman, apparently the most important sponsor, kept saying, sighing happily. "Isn't it beautiful, Dante? Oh, Dante . . ."

"Yes, of course, of course it is . . ."

Then the priests asked the young man to submerge the ring in a basin filled with holy water, prior to giving it to Emma. Very carefully, the *chambelán* did as he was told, and when the object entered the water, it made a rounded, effervescent sound, like *chorrrrr* . . . and caused steam and bubbles to rise to the surface . . . *chorr* . . . *chorrrrr*, as if the young man's sins caused boiling upon its entry into the blessed liquid. Dante observed the young man with a worried expression, but calmed down when one of the Fathers Pichón assured him that it was natural and happened at all *quinceañeras*.

Suddenly, everything shook, and the band Los Vengadores del Norte, armed with very powerful speakers, again burst forth with the strains of the "Blue Danube." It was as if the light of the Holy Spirit suddenly descended upon the social center; the *chambelán* went into action, he raised and lowered the cane several times and, in English, repeated "one, two, three . . . one, two, three."

Something that bothered Dante was that the young people spoke among themselves in English and used Spanish only to communicate with their parents. Of all her group of friends, Emmita used the family language the least and did not seem to pay much heed to her father's advice about the kind of boys she could go out with.

"Hispanics, like us, that's fine," Dante would say, "but not those other *Hispanic* guys that don't speak Spanish and join gangs and make drug deals."

"One, two, three . . . One, two, three . . ." the *chambelán* repeated as he raised and lowered the golden cane. Then he went over to



the girl turning fifteen and, taking her arm, led the group of fourteen couples who nonetheless were not yet dancing. Instead, they went first toward one wall of the hall where there was a statue of the Virgin of Guadalupe, and they bowed before it. Then they continued around the room, bowing and kneeling before Emmita's godparents, her father, the priests, the neighbors, and a group of gringos who were taking flash pictures nonstop.

But Emmita did not look very happy. During several of the obligatory bows, she was unable to hide an unpleasant expression of contempt or boredom. Finally, when the couples began to dance, their feet traveling with the triumphal strains of the waltz, she seemed neither to be in this world nor in the other one, and when it was time for her to dance with her father, she kept looking toward the door.

Dante realized that his daughter was no longer the same person. It was as if she had been replaced. No longer was she the little girl whose headache or stomach cramps he could cure by simply repeating to her "*Sana, sana, colita de rana.*" Those spells no longer had any effect on her. He recalled a neighbor who had warned him to keep an eye on his daughter.

"I don't want to meddle, but I think I saw her with a boy that's not from here. He wasn't one of our boys."

Then she had described the interloper: he looked Mexican, but barely spoke Spanish; he came to town in a lowrider or a huge truck, the kind that gang members drive, and dressed completely in black. They had explained to Dante that the guy came around when he was working. Dante couldn't believe it. He imagined that—in order to not be seen or heard—his daughter's friend hung from the roofs at night like a sinister pouch and that his wings covered him completely, nocturnal, fateful, ominous, evil, hanging, flying, silent, deadly.

The day he talked to the neighbor, he got up the courage to tell Emmita that maybe it was time to talk very seriously about some matters.

"First of all, I believe that you're getting all grown up . . ."

"Please, Dad, don't interrupt. I'm watching TV."

Weeks after that failed attempt, Dante decided to try again because when he came home late, it seemed to him that a small shadow detached from the neighbors' roof and flew off screeching toward the blackest part of the sky; when he closed his eyes, he saw two small, piercing eyes that kept watching him; on other occasions the small beast's silence transformed into a screech, and it seemed that it was announcing the end of the world, or the end of *his* world.

"I've always told you that Mexican boys your age are very proper, and that if you're going to have a suitor, it would seem normal to see you with one of them."

Emma stared at him and turned up the volume on the TV and then, only then, did it occur to him that maybe, and maybe for the worse, the neighbors were telling the truth, and when he thought about the bat again, he looked not young, but old, dry, and perverse, like one of those faces that is always watching you from an accursed tomb.



*Y tú, quién sabe por dónde andarás, quién sabe qué aventuras tendrás, qué lejos estás de mí.* The band Los Vengadores del Norte didn't know the words to this *bolero*, but Don Manuel Montoya had come prepared with recordings for those fond of old songs, and the leader of the orchestra was obliged to play it, and his musicians to accompany him. *Like a little moonbeam, asleep in the midst of the jungle, you gave light to my life, like a bright little moonbeam.* The adults began to dance. Like the sponsor of the fireworks, a dozen other men were singing into their partner's ear. Some of the women were sighing. And then, *Although the virgin may be white, paint little black angels for her, for all the good little black ones to Heaven too . . .* Mr. Longaray closed his eyes like one of the good little *negritos* in the song.

But the band was prepared to please everyone and continued with "El corrido de Johnny el Pachuco" by Steve Jordan, followed by "Ay te dejo en San Antonio" by Flaco Jiménez and then Joe



the orchestra, the music, the sponsors, the guests, the sequined dress of the large mistress of ceremonies, and perhaps also life itself, because the heavenly warbling of Doña Maruja Tafur was abruptly overwhelmed by a brutal drumbeat and beams from headlights that invaded the social center.

“What we had thought was an explosion of snare drums became a thousand and one blasts of a motorcycle engine, or of many motorcycle engines. I looked at the faces of the other people, and they were all confused. But they weren’t regular motorcycles, they were lowriders with their mufflers removed. From them emerged a group of young men who looked like gang members, and they entered the party uninvited.”

According to him, when the gang arrived, many guests returned to their tables or slipped toward the exit without saying a word, but Emmita’s face shone with a ferociously beautiful light.

“I tried to look toward the main door because it seemed odd to me that the gang members were trying to come in uninvited, but there was no one there anymore because the strangers were already inside and surrounding us without our realizing or wanting to realize it. The only thing I remember is having seen a young man dressed all in black enter the hall. Behind him, his companions had their hair slicked back, gleaming as if they had put Vaseline on it.”

Dante will remember it for the rest of his life. He’ll remember all of it, the stranger dressed in black, hair slicked, moving toward Emma . . . and reaching her although Dante tried vainly to step between them. In her syrupy, frightened voice, the mistress of ceremonies was screaming, “No, please! No, please! Leave us alone! Don’t do this to us!”

They didn’t do much. All they did was remove the orchestra and turn the sound system up to full volume with buzzes, roars, explosions and from time to time a raucous voice sang or shouted something in English.

Some of the guests managed to say their good-byes, but others did not. Dante, standing next to the door, tried to stop them and explain that it was all a mistake, but they left him practically alone.



He collapsed into a chair, put his elbows on a table, and the planet ceased to exist for him.

Some say the gang members made Dante drink a strange substance. Others say he was knocked out by being hit on the head with the butt of a pistol and the gang took over the party. They became the masters of the *quinceañera* and, in the end, gave Emmita time to pack her bag and get into the back seat of one of the lowriders.

But Dante does not remember it like that:

“Nothing happened. What newspaper did you say you work for? No, sir, nothing happened that night.”

“I’m taking notes to write a story. Perhaps that detail will not be included.”

“Nothing happened.”

“How many of them were there?”

Dante looks at the sky.

“The gang members. How many?”

“I repeat: nothing happened.”

In any case, he awoke the next morning. Maybe regaining consciousness at the hall or in his bed if it’s true that nothing happened. Maybe he decided to believe that he had dreamed it all.

According to what he says he remembers, it was late the next morning when he went by his daughter’s bedroom door and wanted to invite her to go out for a walk to talk about life. He knocked three times on the door, and no one answered. He waited another hour and knocked again, but the door did not open. Then he pushed the door open and found his daughter’s bed made, as if she had not slept there.

Never again, no matter how many times the world turns, would Dante ever be so alone. It was obvious that his daughter had left him and that the party planned during most of her life had been a failure.

He found nothing but his daughter’s letter waiting for him. It was on her desk. He says that he saw the letter and that he could no longer see anything else. Since it would take him a long time to read it and he wouldn’t understand it completely, he decided to go find a trusted friend.

But when he walked out of the house he met the huge eyes of the donkey to whom he had given shelter the day before. He thought that he would go find its owner later.

"I'm leaving, Dad, I don't feel right in this environment that you have for me. Remember, Dad, you aren't in Mexico anymore and I'm not a little girl. You and Mom always took me to the Hispanic parties, to church, to Spanish classes, and now you organized this ridiculous party for me. Dad, I'm an American girl. Johnny and I have been going out for a long time, like more than six months. Now I'm going to go live with him . . . How do you think I could have told you that, Dad, since you don't like boys who speak English, you can't stand guys that wear earrings or have tattoos . . . Dad, these aren't your times and you aren't in your country anymore. Dad, I'm fifteen years old now, and you don't even let me go out at night.

"Remember the party at the end of the school year? At ten o'clock you were already there to pick me up, I looked like an idiot in front of everyone. Nobody has to do that. You know that my grades are better than those of my friends, but their parents reward them even for getting a C+ and let them do whatever they want during vacations, even stay at their boyfriends' apartments. But you and Mom always insisted on treating me like a little girl. Wake up, Dad, I'm an American girl. I wasn't born in Michoacán.

"Papá, don't come looking for me. You have no right to. If you do find me, the police will ask me if I want to live with you or not, and I will say I don't because this is a free country. And if you fight it because I'm not eighteen yet, they'll send me to a home for adolescents, but they won't make me stay with you because, Dad, you're practically illiterate, and you can't offer me the future that you yourself don't have. Don't you realize that you can't even read this whole letter and that you'll have to ask someone else to read it to you?

"Don't try to stop me, Dad, because Johnny can pay good lawyers and, if you fight it, you could end up in jail. And don't worry too much, maybe someday I'll be back, but that will be after I've achieved my dream of being a great singer, like Selena. Johnny

knows businessmen and has a lot of influential friends, and he'll get me an audition. I'm gonna be famous, Dad."

*Like Selena. Como una flor. Like a flower.*

*And bidi bidi bom bom. And bidi bidi bom bom.*

"I'm telling you, Dad, for your own good, don't try to stop me. For your own good."

A few days after the party Dante set off into the world in search of his daughter with no friend other than a lame donkey.

*Como una flor. Like a flower.*

*And bidi bidi bom bom. And bidi bidi bom bom.*